



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Rejection letter  
Epiphany 5, Year A  
Sunday, February 8, 2020  
The Rev. Amber Carswell

Dear Jesus, son of Joseph,  
Congratulations on writing your first sermon and submitting it for publication here at Pulpit Press, Inc. We take pride in being number one in edifying publications, and are always on the lookout for new and fresh ways of spreading the Xtreme Word of God™. We regret to inform you that we cannot publish your submission "The Sermon on the Mount" and offer the following feedback for you to consider at this foundational time of your career:

We notice a lack of humor in the text. There's nothing like starting off with a good joke — or even a bad joke! I heard a great one the other day about how many Germans it takes to screw in a lightbulb. Nein. See? Don't you feel better about reading a rejection letter? No one doesn't like a good lightbulb joke and that one's on the house. If humor isn't your strong suit, then tell a personal story. People want to connect with their preachers, Jesus, and you're giving us nothing to go on here.

Now, it does seem like parts of your sermon are funny, but I'm not sure if that's what you're intending. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek? Blessed are the broke and the sad and the ones who get made fun of? Is this a joke? You seem awfully serious. Look, did you have an actual career before trying to become a preacher? If you've ever desired to be a professional anything, time to start downplaying these traits. Preachers in particular. Preachers are bold, polished, erudite, strong, successful. Image is everything! Have you seen Joel Osteen's teeth? We recommend some trendy glasses and designer sneakers. Also, a wife and two kids, hugely attractive. You're in your 30s now; people talk.

No one here at Pulpit Press, Inc. is exactly clear as to where you're going with these blessings. If the persecuted are blessed, what about the people who follow you who are not weak nor poor, in spirit or otherwise? We think you'll alienate a portion of your followers by blessing people who don't look like them, and it's likely they'll find someone to tell them that blessed are the successful, for it means that God favors them above all. They'll find someone to tell them that blessed are those with walls, who will never have to confront their poor neighbor. In our time, blessed are the straight-talkers, which you ought to really work on. In the 21st century, we're not really concerned with causing hatred and division so long as we have the thrill of a one-line-zinger to the other party. The more bombastic, the higher the ratings.

Moving on, you do have good imagery present about being salt and light. But it seems like you could punch it up a few notches. Salt is so passive — what if you were the ghost pepper to flavor the entire chili with the burn of your righteousness? And the light image — a candle is so vulnerable and limited. How about saying you're the strobe lamp to demand attention and that masks any notion of mystery or darkness?

This is our problem with the entire sermon, Jesus. You're making people think too hard. I don't get the feeling like you're actually trying to attract followers or console anyone. Your hyperbole is downright shocking: you say you are not coming to abolish the law, which is bad enough, because people want a grace that doesn't demand anything of their time or effort or loving their unlovable neighbor. But you say you want to keep the law, and that keeping it is harder than we can possibly imagine. Chop off your arm if it

causes you to sin, put out your eyes if you've ever looked with desire on anyone, and you're an adulterer if you've been divorced — and not only that, but these things are no longer going to land you a momentary punishment doled out by a council, as the law would have done. Now the punishment is an eternal one in the flames of hell!

No one gets out clean. No one has what it takes. Is this your point?

I'll be honest. It sounds like the arc of the human story you're bringing us through. A beginning, a descent into pain, and out to the other side, changed — directed to outward to the journeys of others.

It would mean that those of us who are strong, and bold, and able, and joyful, actually need the grace that can only be found in our neighbors. It would mean that the frightened, weak, neurotic places of ourselves, so carefully concealed, are where You are found... where You will bless.

It would mean that we must look beyond our own comfortable, constructed communities for the place where God dwells, for the people where God's blessing resides.

If we are the light of the world, it would mean that we need our neighbors' light to go into the darkensses of our human existence, because one person's dim beam can only illuminate so much. If we are the salt of the earth, and we lost our saltiness, it would mean our neighbor could be the one to replenish our stock.

If this were about the world beyond us, it would mean that our actions of violence and acquisition and lust and greed have far-reaching consequences beyond our own personal judgment before God; that they affect our neighbors, here, now: and that it would be better to lose a part of ourselves than to cause our neighbor to be left outside the bounds of communion. It would be better to put ourselves into the wilderness than to reject anyone seeking sanctuary.

This is a hard word in an individualistic, materialistic, celebrity-fueled, anger-driven world.

But I think you might be right. To be honest, I wish you weren't. Life is so complicated and difficult, I would like to have one easy, eternal answer in religion, in the questions of our existence. I know I'm not alone in this, which is why I still don't think you'll get published. Not many will go for it, and those who do will have a time keeping that lamp lit. But they might be like a little salt or a little yeast worked into a large batch of dough — something to flavor and lift a whole community.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Apophatic theology understands God in a negative sense, i.e., it speaks of what God is *not* rather than to speak of what God *is*. This sermon is an exercise of a tongue-in-cheek sort of apophatic theology.